

# Isabella A. Nassau OF AFRICA



The Woman's Foreign Missionary Society  
of the Presbyterian Church

501 Witherspoon Building

Philadelphia, Pa.

Price, 3 cents; 30 cents a dozen



# *Isabella A. Nassau*

## *OF AFRICA*

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**F**ROM my earliest childhood I wished to go to Africa as a missionary. I cannot tell how I came to say one day, when we children were playing, that I would be a missionary to Africa. But most vividly I remember that soon after I had said the word, it was impressed upon me that I could not take back the word I had spoken; it was a vow. I think now it was a Divine call." Thus Miss Nassau, when a veteran missionary, told how she came to choose Africa for her mission field.

### EARLY ENVIRONMENT.

Isabella Ann Nassau had behind her a lineage devoted to Christian service, and around her an atmosphere of Christian intelligence and activity. Her grandfather, William Nassau of Philadelphia, was an active member of the "Board of Missions," afterwards known as the Board of Domestic Missions, for more than thirty years, and for seven years its treasurer. Her father was Rev. Charles William Nassau, pastor and professor. Her mother was Hannah McClintock Hamill, sister of Robert, Samuel M., and Hugh Hamill, names well known in the annals of the Presbyterian ministry and of preparatory schools.

Miss Nassau was born January 20th, 1829, near Norristown, Pa., while her father was pastor of the Providence Church. She was the second child and oldest daughter in a family of ten. She was baptized June 28th, 1829, in the Old Pine Street Church, Philadelphia, by Dr. Ezra Stiles Ely.

*Frankford*

*a/* A few years of girlhood were spent in Hannibal, Missouri, whither her father removed to become Professor in a proposed Theological Seminary, and to teach Latin and Greek in Merion College. Then the family came back to Montgomery Square, near Norristown, for a brief period, and in 1841, when Isabella was twelve years of age, removed to the college hill in Easton. There her father became Professor of Latin and Greek in Lafayette College. As the eldest daughter, she had already begun to have a share in the care and direction of the younger children. She attended, as a day pupil, the boarding school of Miss Lorraine, down in the town. At the age of fourteen, on October 25th, 1843, she made public confession of her faith, in the First Church of Easton. Three and a half years later (May 19th, 1847), at the age of eighteen, her name appears among the Sunday school teachers of that church.

#### YOUNG WOMANHOOD.

A little later, she became a pupil of the Young Ladies' Seminary at Lawrenceville, N. J., then in charge of the Misses Craig. In 1850, Dr. Nassau purchased this Seminary, and removed there to become its head, and from that date until Miss Nassau sailed for Africa, in 1868, a period of eighteen years, she was a teacher in that institution.

In January, 1851, she, together with her mother and sister, upon certificate from the church in Easton, and a sister upon profession of faith, united with the Lawrenceville church. The Rev. Mr. Gosman, pastor-elect, and later her brother-in-law, had not yet assumed full charge. Her uncle, Rev. Hugh Hamill, was Moderator of the Session which received her, and her father conducted the first communion service of which she partook as a member of this church.

Being now an energetic, capable and earnest young woman of twenty-two, she entered at once and actively into the religious work of the church. She took a Sunday school class. She became a tract distributor, and regularly tramped many miles in covering her district. She joined the Missionary Society and soon became its Secretary and one of its moving spirits. For years and until she laid down the pen to start for Africa, the minutes are in her hand. In her last days, writing from Africa and describing herself as "this lone woman in this far-off land," she said of Lawrenceville, "While life lasts it will be the dearest spot on earth to me."

#### THE CALL OF AFRICA.

Although as a daughter, sister, teacher, active church member, she sought to honor Christ, she had not yet had the opportunity of service for which her heart yearned. Like the great missionary, Paul, she had heard the call of "the regions beyond." Through what channel the Spirit first gave the call we cannot certainly say. She herself said she could not tell. It may have been through the prayers and teachings learned at her mother's knee, for to these her brother, Rev. Dr. R. Hamill Nassau, ascribes his first interest in missions. It may have been the missionary hymns which she delighted to sing in childhood, and a favorite one of which was "The Missionary's Call." It appears clear that the call gained direction and force through a brief visit made to her father's house in Easton by Rev. and Mrs. G. W. Simpson. They were about to go out to Africa, to assist in starting the Corisco Mission, which they did in 1850. They were earnest in their invitation to this interested young woman to follow them. That they themselves were drowned within a year, while on a

voyage to a neighboring island, probably added pathos and power to the invitation they had given.

#### DETAINED HERSELF, SHE SEEKS TO SEND OTHERS.

But young Miss Nassau's desire to offer for Africa had not yet met with the sanction of her parents. It was considered an impropriety for an unmarried woman to venture in such savage fields. Although she could not go to Africa, God had, in His providence, brought some of the Africans within her reach, and she would work for them, and if possible through them for Africa. She took a particular interest in the colored people of the neighborhood, and visited among them. She gathered a class of three or four young colored men, whom she sought to prepare for what was then Ashmun Institute, and has since become Lincoln University. She hoped that they might become missionaries in Africa. One of them, at least, became a minister, but never reached the Dark Continent.

But her missionary enthusiasm from girlhood had been helping to prepare another missionary for the land of her desires. She fanned the flame of missionary zeal which had been kindled in the breast of Robert Hamill Nassau at his mother's knee. When he sailed for Africa in 1861 (as he himself records), she rejoiced in his going as probably opening a way for herself. And so it proved. At his suggestion, the Mission in Africa sent her a formal invitation to join them. The scruples of her parents were finally overcome by her brother's presence there, his reports and this invitation.

#### AFRICA AT LAST.

At last, in March, 1868, when she was already a mature woman of almost forty years of age, Isabella Nassau set foot on African soil, to begin the missionary

career of which she had dreamed, for which she had longed and prayed. It was a grave experiment for any one to make under the circumstances. To enter upon new work and that in a climate so different and so trying, not only to learn new languages, but to learn to enter really into the thought and life and experience of men and women and children so diverse from those with whom she had hitherto dealt—this would have been a great task even in that period of life when such learning and adaptation is easiest. That the experiment resulted in such splendid success is witness not only to the keen intellect and the strong will of Isabella Nassau, but I believe above all to that ardent love for Christ and for Africans which from youth had glowed in her heart.

#### SCHOOLS AND THEOLOGICAL CLASSES.

Her aptitudes, her acquirements, her experience, her preference, made clear the line of her work in Africa; it was pre-eminently that of a teacher. Securing a native assistant from among the mission helpers at Corisco, she began there a school for girls. In a few months, with her assistant, she crossed to her brother's house at Mbade of the Benito Station on the mainland. Here she began with boys. Presently she removed with her school to her own new house at Bolondo. Among the half clad little savages to whom she then taught the alphabet was one whose name now appears in the Minutes of our General Assembly as Rev. Frank Sherrerd Myongo, pastor of Hanje native church, Batanga. He is now the senior native minister of the Presbytery. From A, B, C's to theology, Isabella Nassau was his only teacher.

But he was only one. As Dr. Nassau reports, for thirty years, from 1870 to 1900, the theological class

was almost solely under Miss Nassau's care. Some of the men had scruples about committing this work to a woman, but it was necessary that the work should be done. The male missionaries had neither time nor patience to do it. Isabella Nassau could do it and she did. When the men came up for examination in Presbytery, they were found prepared. Dr. Halsey, Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions, who was present on one of these occasions, wrote: "I listened to the examination of these candidates for the Gospel ministry, and was well satisfied that whatever St. Paul meant when he said that women should not speak in the church, he did not mean that women should not teach in a theological seminary in Africa."

But she did not teach only those who were sent to her. Rather, she was herself another Priscilla—one who did not need an Aquila-to aid her. She herself sought out many of the apt pupils to whom she taught the way of God. Her brother says candidates for the ministry seemed to sprout where she trod.

While the training of students for the ministry was perhaps the most striking, unusual and important form of her work, it was by no means all. Beside the little group of theological students who followed her about, partly by her own labor and partly by the assistance of others, she carried on schools for boys or girls, or more usually for both, wherever she was.

Leaving Bolondo in 1878, she followed her brother up the Ogowe River, first to Kangwe for seven years, and then in 1885 to Talaguga, still further inland. The Ogowe Missions in French territory were turned over to the Paris Evangelical Society in 1892. Then, for the fourth time, she was moved to a new field. This time it was to Batanga, in the German territory of Kamerun, which became thenceforth her African home and is her last resting place.

To teaching Miss Nassau presently added translation, that her scholars and others might have some Christian literature in their native tongues. She prepared and secured the printing of (1) A Compend of the Bible in Benga; (2) Scripture Questions in Benga; (3) Scripture Questions in Mpongwe; (4) Church History in Benga; (5) Benga Customs. She herself reduced one language to writing.

#### DIRECT EVANGELISM.

But with her, as with all true missionaries, the intellectual training, vitally important as it is, was only a means to an end. The spiritual regeneration and up-building of these Africans for whom she believed Christ died was the goal toward which her eye was ever turned, her efforts ever directed. While physical strength allowed, she seized opportunities to itinerate through other villages than those in which she dwelt. She canvassed her own towns and held prayer meetings in the homes. When growing infirmities prevented much walking, these meetings were delegated to her native assistants, but down to the very last she kept up her attendance on the Thursday Woman's Prayer Meeting in the church near by her home, and gathered about her on Sunday afternoon a little group of earnest Christian women for prayer and counsel.

Some extracts from one of her later letters, describing one of her Sundays and particularly this little meeting, reveal far more beautifully than the words of another could do, her own spirit in her missionary work and the sympathy that must have been one great secret of her power. She wrote, July 18th, 1904:

"DEAR SISTER:—This is Sabbath evening; the precious hours have been filled with precious opportunities for service. First, in the service of nine A. M., the part

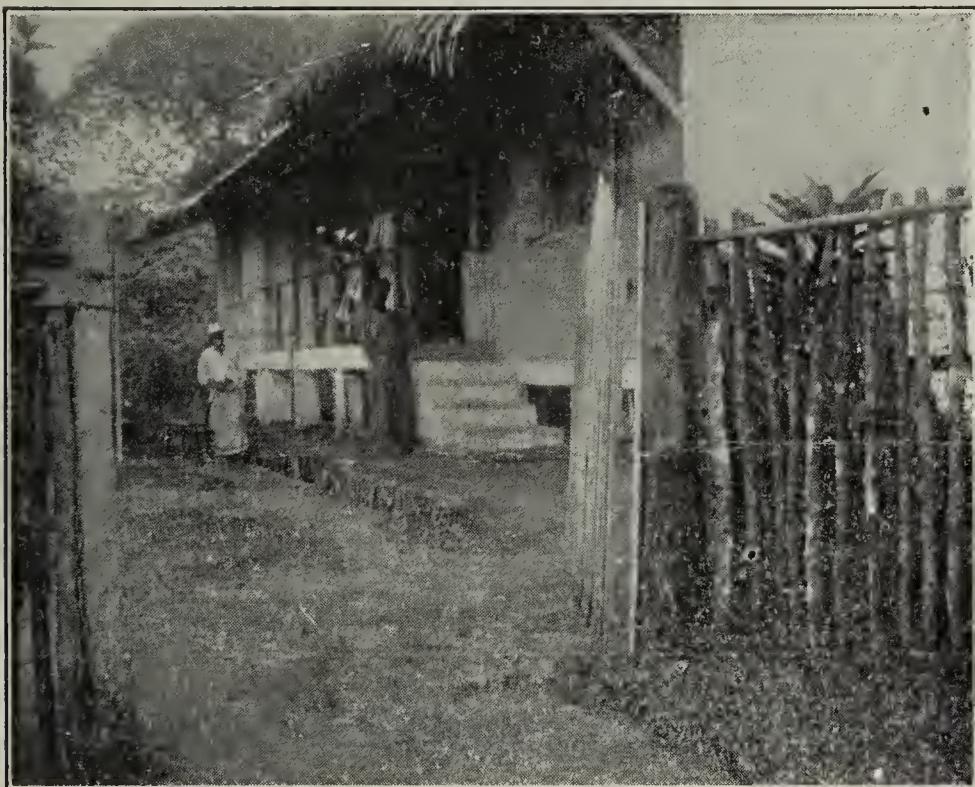
of organist falls to me. It is a service I love to render, although my fingers are sometimes a little stiff; then my lunch at twelve M. At two P. M., the Sabbath School—the Superintendent is our native licentiate, Mbula Dipipi, and it falls to me, in a variety of ways, to superintend him, so that I usually have a much-used-up feeling when four P. M. comes; but the faithful little circle of our small Christian Endeavor Society were awaiting me in the school room, and it was my turn to lead. I always find that, no matter how broken down I feel, I am *sure* that strength will come to me from the Loved Unseen if my faith is but strong enough to *rely* on it and take my Saviour at His word. We had a most interesting meeting, though only five were present. After our tea, the quiet hour came which I like to give to my two girls who are living with Mrs. Ogden and myself in this Evangeline Cottage. We sang and talked, and when the bell rang at seven P. M. for service, I realized that I dared not go out to the meeting, but the two girls went, and I am attempting to tell something about the little Christian Endeavor meeting of this afternoon. It has gladdened my heart and encouraged me, oh, so much!

"These dear native women and I are getting near each other's hearts when we clasp each other's hands in these little meetings. One part of our pledge is that each one is to make some direct, personal effort for the conversion of some soul, or the edification of some fellow-Christian, and there is always something to be told."

#### WAYSIDE MINISTRY.

Miss Nassau's last earthly home was known as "Evangeline Cottage," probably so called because that name is derived from evangel, gospel—good news. It became a veritable pulpit from which Miss Nassau preached the glad tidings not to little groups only, but to wide regions in the interior. For, as Dr. Halsey tells us: "A well-trodden path leads by Evangeline Cottage. Carriers from the distant interior pass on their way to the factory beyond. The good missionary sits in the

doorway of the cottage, and by the aid of the baby organ induces the carrier to rest for a while on his journey. The Word of God is preached to these passers-by, some of whom are never seen again, but surely we have the promise, 'My Word shall not return unto Me void, but it shall accomplish the purpose whereunto it is sent.'"



*EVANGELINE COTTAGE*

We have from Miss Nassau's own pen an account of the result in the case of one of these passers-by:

(Extract from letter dated Sabbath, July 31st, 1904.)

"Noon time we like to keep for our private devotions, but to-day my Bulu friend, an old man named 'Nkoto,' came, and I spent nearly one and a half hours instructing him. \* \* \* \* He insists that he is a Christian, for 'he prays.' (Is not that true Gospel?) His town is

beyond Elat Station; and King Madolo, my neighbor, who journeys to distant places and has visited Nkolombonda, the town of Nkoto, many times, informs me that Nkoto keeps the Sabbath, compels his people to do so also, and that he preaches to his people! Just think of it! Within the last three weeks he has twice bidden good-bye and gone to his town. But he is not satisfied to stay there; he says he loves to be here at Batanga,



*MISS NASSAU AND MRS. OGDEN IN THEIR AFRICAN HOME*

to hear the little organ and to be taught. He brings such nice, well-behaved people with him, who all make daily visits to me. I had not noticed many while Sunday school was in progress, but at its close, more than twenty gathered around the organ, and though it was time for our dear little Christian Endeavor meeting in the Girls' School, I told the women to go on without me and I played for the Bulu and helped them with Bulu hymns."

#### *WAITING ON THE LORD.*

Another quotation from one of her later letters leads us into the Holy of Holies of her life, the shrine where she communed with God. It witnesses to her simple faith, her whole-hearted devotion. On her seventieth birthday, in 1899, she wrote:

"Some months ago, Dr. Gillespie wrote me suggesting a furlough. I love this African land. I feel very much at home among its people, and while the dear Lord continues to me some ability for work, I cannot say I wish to go back to America. I regard the providential orderings that have thus permitted me to work, as very high privileges. Since Hamill left, there have been many times when I have longed to see you all, and my thoughts have travelled after him."

Then she tells how another missionary had come offering her his escort to America in September. She continues:

"I thanked him most heartily and showed my appreciation of his kind thought, but could not just then decide. There is *only One* who can help me in such decisions. I waited on the Lord. For days I had no answer. At last it came thus: I had been reappointed to the instruction of the class of candidates; if I were to leave in September, it would be impossible for me to keep up my usual instructions and at the same time be gathering up my things for a departure, for I am so deeply rooted. After that ray of light there came another. To start from here in the latter part of September would bring me to America at the very beginning of a long and cold season of the year. How plain it all seemed! I had not spoken to any one of how I was waiting on the Lord. You cannot know how this waiting on the Lord and this 'showing' the way has relieved my mind. I want to sing for joy, but the use of my voice in singing is not now permitted me; it causes a hacking cough, followed by painful soreness."

Because Miss Nassau thus lived in constant, happy communion with God, her face shone with good cheer as she mingled with mankind. She maintained even to old age a merry disposition, which won the young, while it heartened the aged and the care-worn. One of the last pictures of her, drawn by the pen of Mrs. Lippert, in whose house she was at the time and where later she died, shows this side of her character. Mrs. Lippert writes:

"She is such a dear old lady, so full of love and faith in God, and she has so much charity and love for these people, for whom she has done and given so much, and who at times have seemed so unappreciative. We are glad to have her with us. Nellie is devoted to her, for she can tell the most wonderful stories, and all true. She likes to do little things for her and spends much of her play-time in her room."

#### CLOSING SCENES.

Miss Nassau's death occurred on Tuesday, the 12th of June, 1906, and from Dr. Lippert, her fellow-missionary and physician, we have this account of her last days:

"When Mrs. Lippert and I arrived at Batangá from the interior, a little over four months ago, Miss Nassau received us in a most sisterly way. As we had never before been associated with her in the work at a station, we were not well acquainted with her, and we are very thankful that we were able to know her and to see her in her daily life.

"Our dear sister had suffered much during the last year from an incomplete paralysis of the right arm beside the ills which accompany old age.

"A more devoted and consecrated follower of Jesus I have never seen. At times she would be so feeble that she could hardly leave her bed, still she would insist upon doing something for others, entirely forgetting herself. The girls' school, which she so long and so faithfully taught, was upon her mind continually, and most of her energy was employed in guiding and directing the teachers and pupils.

"Because of her increasing feebleness, the missionaries at various times advised her to return to America, but she, choosing rather privations and labor than the comfort of her American home, remained in Africa to toil until such a time as the Master would call her. She was not one to fold her hands in idleness to await the end, but most truly died in service.

"Two months ago, realizing that she was becoming too feeble to take care of herself, she consented to come and live with us, but after one month she was so much

improved that she felt she ought to go back to her work until such a time as she could arrange to leave it in other hands. She also intimated that as Dr. Nassau would soon be leaving for America, and as she would probably never see him again, she wished to be with him as much as possible before he left. After the Doctor left she still felt it to be her duty to stay by the girls, saying, however, that she was looking forward to the time when she could come to live with her friends. Of late she was unable to walk any distance, and when she wished to make a visit was drawn in a wheeled chair.

"The Saturday before her death she visited us and seemed to be unusually happy and cheerful. On Sunday I visited her, and found her suffering somewhat. The next day her condition was alarming, and we hastened to remove her to our home. She rallied to some extent, but the next morning, while talking with her cook about household affairs, she was attacked by a cerebral hemorrhage and death came suddenly and painlessly.

"To tell of her virtues, her good deeds, her entire unselfishness and consideration for others, would take many pages. Many of you know her much better than we do, but I must say that her daily Christlike life was, and will continue to be, an inspiration to all who knew her. Though we miss her greatly, we are glad that she has gone to the home prepared for her, where the ills of the flesh and the ingratitude of men will not again cause her sorrow.

"The natives, too, have suddenly come to the conviction that they had appreciated 'Mama Bella' far too little during her lifetime. Her goodness had been so constant toward them that they took it as a matter of course, and often failed to recognize her claims upon them, though all of them loved her as a small child loves its mother.

"She gave her life for the people of Africa and the cause of Christ, and many will be the jewels in her crown.

"The remains were interred in the mission cemetery. Great numbers of Christian and heathen natives, beside representatives of European trading firms and of the German Government, and the missionaries at the station,

were present at the solemn and impressive services conducted by Rev. Mr. Heminger and two native ministers, once her pupils."

#### MANY TRIBUTES.

The German Governor sent a wreath of flowers and a letter of condolence, in which he said: "Her unselfish activity, her courageous persistency in staying for so many years in the dreaded climate of tropical Africa, procured for Miss Nassau the reverence and admiration not only of the whites, but in particular and to a very high degree of the native inhabitants of this station, and have created for her in the whole district a lasting memory."

It would be a pleasure to quote, if space permitted, some of the other words of appreciation and affection, which Miss Nassau's death called forth from the Board of Foreign Missions, under which she served; from the Woman's Board of Foreign Missions, Philadelphia, of which she was one of the first missionaries; from the Society of the Woodland Church, Philadelphia, which from 1870 supported her as its special representative; from the missionaries associated with her upon the field, and from her faithful and devoted African assistants; but even so brief and imperfect a review of her own life and work as has been here given demonstrates that encomiums of others are not needed to carry conviction of her beautiful character, her great devotion and her eminent services.

She has passed into the manifest presence and to the gracious reward of Him whose word declares:

"They that be wise (margin, *teachers*) shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever."

SAMUEL McLANAHAN.

*Lawrenceville, N. J.*